

Rowing Through Rough Waters

By Pete Blackledge

My selection for the U.S. Naval Academy (USNA) had an auspicious beginning. I was sitting in a "academically advanced" Physics class at Lamar High School in Houston, Texas, when the school Principal came on the school's loud speaker: "This is Principal Costlow. I have a very special announcement. Peter Blackledge, who was nominated by President Lyndon Johnson to attend the U.S. Naval Academy, was today accepted to be a member of the Naval Academy Class Of 1969. We couldn't be more proud of Peter, and I hope all of you will all join me in congratulating him for this outstanding achievement." Surprised at hearing this very public pronouncement from our usually taciturn Principal of our very large and highly rated school, I was then even more surprised as my entire class suddenly rose and gave me a rousing standing ovation. These were classmates of mine whom I knew had secured scholarships to such prestigious universities as Stanford, MiT, Princeton, and Harvard ---- colleges which were probably beyond my academic grasp. I was dumbfounded. That amazing support continued after I entered USNA; I recall coming home in uniform on my first Christmas vacation, and having guys patting me on the back with support, girls giving me an approving look, and little old ladies smiling as if I were their favorite grandchild. However, two years later, as the Vietnam War ravaged and divided our country, and the era of "Peace-Love-Dove" enveloped America, my coming home in that same uniform on Christmas vacation elicited universally stern stares and even taunts of "Baby Killer" being hurled at me. This extraordinary dichotomy presaged my broader bifurcated experience at the Naval Academy, which I found was almost universally shared by my classmates ---- as the enthusiasm at being selected for USNA gave way to the grinding daily demands. As my former Lamar classmates were enthusiastically regaling me with tales of their idyllic college experience being "the best years of their lives", my USNA classmates and I were enduring demeaning and often brutal hazing. But my experience of rowing Freshman and then Varsity Crew for USNA became the one shining light which made it all worthwhile for me and many of my teammates. For most people, rowing crew no doubt appears to be rather boring. Spending long hours each day in practice, performing the same stroke over and over while staring at the back of the oarsman in front of you, could certainly seem to be a waste of time. But for those of us who have rowed competitive

collegiate Crew against top Ivy League colleges, there is a feeling so sublime that it often becomes ----- as it has for me ----- the most extraordinary experience of our lives. The picture below is from the front page of the Sports section of a major Philadelphia newspaper, reporting on the 1969 Varsity Heavyweight race between Navy, Harvard, & Penn for the Adams Cup. In my view, it captures some of that essence of that experience: The crowds of spectators lining the sides of the river cheering loudly as 3 major collegiate crews are locked in fierce battle. The Navy racing shell is in the foreground, & you can clearly see the intensity in our faces & musculature as we (L-to-R: Gary Tettlebach, Woody Sutton, myself, Stu Miller, Mike Gembol) are reaching down deep to drive each stroke with every fiber of our being. And when it all comes together, and all 8 (plus coxswain) highly trained & conditioned athletes are pouring out everything they have, and the racing shell leaps forward with pulsing power & energy at each stroke as if it were a single racing beast cutting through the water like a searing knife, it is an indescribable feeling of exhilaration ----- which is only surpassed by the unbridled ecstasy when there is ultimate victory, as I was privileged to experience at the Intercollegiate Rowing Association (IRA) National Championships. (See IRA and Sports Illustrated Magazine pictures, and New York Times article). It was the most extraordinary and ebullient moment of my life, and made everything required to get there worthwhile.